

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 708

EC 306 796

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TITLE Professional Development Practices in Gifted Education: Results of a National Survey.

INSTITUTION National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, Storrs, CT.

SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.

PUB DATE 1998-00-00

NOTE 5p.

AVAILABLE FROM National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut, 362 Fairfield Road, U-7, Storrs, CT 06269-2007; Tel: 860-486-4676; Fax: 860-486-2900.

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Faculty Development; *Financial Support; *Gifted; *Inservice Teacher Education; National Surveys; *Peer Teaching; Program Evaluation; Regular and Special Education Relationship; School Districts; *Talent; Teacher Collaboration

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a national survey that investigated the scope and nature of professional development practices in gifted education used in 1,231 school districts across the country. Professional development was defined on the survey as a planned program of learning opportunities to improve the performance of the administrative and instructional staff. Closed-ended statements were included in the following areas: mission and philosophy, needs assessments, goal setting, incentives, design of professional development practices, impact, topics, formats, scheduling, options, and providers. Each statement was followed by responses on a 4-point scale ranging from "not accurate" to "completely accurate." Results found: (1) a very small proportion of school districts' total professional development dollars is spent on gifted education topics; (2) gifted education specialists rarely provide professional development training to other faculty members within their school districts; (3) many districts do not take into account the needs of individual faculty members when designing professional development experiences in gifted education; (4) the majority of districts do not evaluate the impact of the professional development practices in gifted education; and (5) peer coaching between classroom teachers and gifted education teachers is seldom or never used to provide professional development. (CR)

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Have you noticed how frequently the following recommendation is stated at the conclusion of research reports in gifted education: "These findings suggest that teachers should be provided with more training to meet the needs of gifted students in the regular classroom"? Policy makers and educators have long recognized the importance of providing professional development experiences to teachers for improving student learning. However, we still do not understand whether information on meeting the needs of capable students is included among these training opportunities and the types of experiences provided to classroom teachers. In 1996, the University of Connecticut site of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) developed, field tested, and administered a comprehensive survey to investigate the scope and nature of professional development practices in gifted education used in school districts throughout the country. Professional development was defined on the survey as "a planned program of learning opportunities to improve the performance of the administrative and instructional staff."

The Professional Development Practices in Gifted Education District Level Survey solicited demographic and gifted education program (if applicable) data, as well as information about districts' professional development practices in gifted education. Close-ended statements were included in the following areas: mission and philosophy, needs assessments, goal setting, incentives, design of professional development practices, impact, topics, formats, scheduling options, and providers. For example, "Beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of professional development in gifted education are provided to the faculty" was followed by responses on a 4-point scale ranging from "not accurate" to "completely accurate," and "Peer coaching between classroom teachers and gifted education teachers is used as a format for professional development practices in gifted education" was followed by responses on a 4-point scale ranging from "never" to "often."

The surveys were mailed to a random sample of 2,940 school districts throughout the country, stratified by region, type of community, and socioeconomic status. Of the surveys disseminated,

1,231 usable surveys were returned, providing a 41.87% response rate and a sampling error estimate of 2.76%. The surveys were mailed to the superintendents, but the individuals who completed the surveys held different positions; for example, 31% of the respondents were superintendents, and 27% were gifted education coordinators. The survey was comprehensive (11 pages long) and provided many findings. Selected descriptive and inferential findings from the survey are presented here.

A very small proportion of school districts' total professional development dollars is spent on gifted education topics: Districts spend only 4% of their total professional development budget on professional development practices related to gifted education.

The individuals who determine the professional development practices in gifted education are primarily the gifted education coordinators (21.4%), superintendents (14.3%), or a district-wide committee (14.3%).

Gifted education specialists rarely provide professional development training to other faculty members within their school districts; for example, 21.6% of the gifted education specialists never provide any training to other faculty members.

Many districts do not take into account the needs of individual faculty members when designing professional development experiences in gifted education; for example, 70% of the districts indicated they had provided at least one professional development experience in gifted education within the last three years, but 17% indicated this was "completely accurate," and 24% indicated this was "generally accurate."

The majority of districts do not evaluate the impact of their professional development practices in gifted education on teachers and students; for example, less than 6% of the districts indicate that this is a "completely accurate" description of their evaluation practices. Peer coaching between classroom teachers and gifted education teachers is seldom (25%) or never (28%) used to provide professional development.

When examining differences among districts in the four regions of the country (Northeast, North Central, South, and West) with regard to the extent to which professional development experiences were provided within the last three years, significant differences were found ($F(3, 1172) = 31.13, p < .05$ with a Bonferonni adjustment), and the post hoc analyses indicated that districts in the South provided significantly more experiences.

When examining differences in districts' professional development practices within the past three years according to state mandates (mandate to identify and serve gifted students, a partial mandate, and no mandate), significant differences were found ($F(2, 1173) = 8.55, p < .05$ with a Bonferonni adjustment), and, as anticipated, the post hoc analyses indicated that more experiences were found in districts with state mandates to identify and serve gifted students. No significant differences were found, however, among these three categories with regard to the degree to which districts provide teachers with beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of professional development in gifted education ($p > .05$).

The overall findings from the survey indicate that the professional development practices in gifted education provided to classroom teachers throughout the country are limited in nature, degree, and scope. One discouraging conclusion drawn from the findings was that only a handful of districts provide differentiated professional development experiences for their teachers. Unfortunately, the "one-size-fits-all" criticism of how capable students are treated in classrooms

can be applied also to how teachers are afforded professional development opportunities within districts. The limited use of peer or collegial coaching as a practice for professional development was another disappointing finding, particularly when research indicates that this practice has the highest effect size for increasing teachers' knowledge, skills, and transfer of training (Joyce & Showers, 1995). The findings and conclusions from the survey are being considered as we investigate methods for providing effective professional development experiences to teachers in the remaining years of this five-year research study.

References

Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (1995). *Student achievement through staff development: Fundamentals of school renewal* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.